

Toxoplasmosis

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by a single-celled parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*.

How does a person acquire toxoplasmosis?

The disease can be acquired by ingesting raw or undercooked infected meat, especially pork, lamb or venison, or in raw milk that contains the parasite. The parasite is shed primarily in the feces of infected cats, and humans can become infected by the ingestion of food, water, or dirt contaminated with cat feces. After the parasite is shed in cat feces, it takes 1 to 5 days to become infective and then may remain infective for months to years. Toxoplasmosis can also be acquired when an infected mother passes the infection to her fetus.

What are the symptoms of toxoplasmosis?

The infection usually does not cause symptoms when acquired after birth. Common symptoms of individuals who do become ill, include fever and swollen lymph nodes. Less frequent symptoms include skin rash, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, pneumonia, and central nervous system problems. The illness tends to be more severe in persons with a weakened immune system. When a pregnant woman passes the infection to her fetus, serious abnormalities or death of the fetus may result, especially if the infection occurs early in the pregnancy.

How soon after being infected do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually take between 5 and 23 days to appear after infection.

Does past infection make a person immune?

Past infection with *Toxoplasma gondii* will probably result in long-term immunity.

How is toxoplasmosis treated?

Most cases of toxoplasmosis do not require treatment. In seriously ill patients or infected pregnant women, a combination of sulfa drugs and anti-parasitic drugs may be used. Persons with a weakened immune system are often placed on a long-term preventive course of sulfa drugs.

(Over)

What can be done to prevent the spread of toxoplasmosis?

Meat should be cooked thoroughly prior to eating. Wash hands and utensils after contact with raw meat. Avoid eating raw eggs and drinking unpasteurized milk. Wash or peel fruits and vegetables before eating.

Cats become infected from other cats or from eating the flesh of infected birds or mammals. Therefore, pet cats should not be fed raw meat and should be prevented from hunting or scavenging. Dispose of cat feces and litter daily before the *Toxoplasma* parasites have a chance to become infective. Feces can be flushed down the toilet or deeply buried; litter can be sealed in a plastic bag in a manner that will not disperse litter dust (and possibly the *Toxoplasma gondii* organism) into the air. Disinfect litter pans daily with scalding water. Unless they are known to have immunity to toxoplasmosis, pregnant women should avoid cleaning litter pans and avoid contact with cats that have an unknown feeding history.

Outdoors, one should wear gloves when gardening. Prevent cats from gaining access to sandboxes used by children; change sand if it is contaminated. Boil lake and river water before drinking.